



# LANTAU'S LEGENDS

By Robert Clark

**From Tang Dynasty rebels to Cheung Po Tsai, the famed pirate who fought a nine-day battle with the Qing navy, to a shocking wartime massacre, our island's history teems with heroes and villains.**

Lantau may be an overlooked corner of Hong Kong, but its size and location have created a past full of legends. Its history teems with pirates, smugglers, rebels and the odd fleeing emperor.

The island's story goes back to the Neolithic age, some 6,500-7,000 years ago. The first known peoples here were the Yau and the She, who practiced a kind of slash-and-burn farming.

The Pearl River estuary came under central government authority during the Qin Dynasty 2,200 years ago, but officials largely left the remote Lantau alone. The tribal people there apparently lived in relative peace with the Han migrants up until the 12th century, when they rose up over restrictions on the salt trade, a traditional government monopoly.

A permanent garrison was posted on the island from that time, aimed not just at keeping the peace but also stopping the growth in piracy. Piracy had become one of Lantau's main industries. As China's sixth-largest island,

at the mouth of the biggest river in southern China, and with an irregular coastline and small population, it was a natural pirates' lair.

Piracy was endemic all along the south China coast, but became a particular scourge during troubled economic times and at the start or end-times of dynasties.

In one of those periods of weakness in the early 1600s, Fujian pirate-smuggler Zheng Zhilong built the most powerful maritime force in south China. He offered his services to the troubled Ming, and then to the victorious Qing, who executed him for his pains.

But his son Zheng Chenggong, kept the faith with the Ming and for 16 years eluded the Qing navy, at one stage leading a 100,000-strong force up the Yangtze to attack Nanjing. Known in the west as Koxinga, he became a folk hero after evicting the Dutch from Taiwan. Taiwan even named a university after him.

But his impact on Lantau, one of his hideaways, was maybe much bigger. To combat Chenggong, the Qing ordered south China residents to move 30km away from the coastal areas of Guangdong in the famous "Great Evacuation", which took place in the late 1600s. This had only a limited effect on pirates, but meant the depopulation of Lantau and the Kowloon peninsula. When

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*Photo: A section of the 18-metre scroll 'Pacifying the South China Sea,' on display at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum*





Hau Wong Temple in Tung Chung. Photo by Nick Seymour

this disastrous policy was rescinded after eight years, Lantau was resettled, primarily by Hakka peoples.

A century later, the most famous of the adventurer-pirates, Cheung Po Tsai, sailed into view.

Cheung was a young fisherman adopted by Zheng Yi, himself a colourful seagoer and, according to some accounts, Cheung was the older man's lover. Cheung later took his stepmother, Zheng Yi Sao, herself a successful smuggler-pirate, as his wife.

Cheung and his wife dominated the south China seas until defeat in a showdown off Tung Chung Bay in 1809 by the combined Qing and Portuguese fleets. They, along with their allies led a fleet of 17,318 pirates and 226 junks in the nine-day battle, known as the Battle of Lantau, but were ultimately forced to surrender.

Cheung's was the model for the Chinese pirate Sao Feng, played by Chow Yun-fat, in *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*. The Battle of Lantau is celebrated in an 18-metre scroll, *Pacifying the South China Sea*, which is on display at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum.

Piracy didn't die with Cheung. Hong Kong's colonial history is full of tales of pirate attacks right up to the mid-20th

century. Some historians today argue that pirates were often not regarded as outlaws by local villagers, who welcomed the pirates' economic contributions.

However, there is ample evidence that people on Lantau feared and despised them. Tai O built a "pirates' gate" to keep these seafarers at bay, and it was still in use in the 1920s, while in 1854 an American naval officer records being showered with gifts by Tai O people after destroying a pirate squadron that had been attacking the village.

### THE BOY EMPEROR

In 1278, the court of the fleeing Southern Song dynasty dropped anchor off Mui Wo. The royal party, including child emperor Duan Zong, a younger prince and their regent (or Hau Wong, meaning "holy marquis") Yang Liang Jie, spent several months on the island, apparently in the Tung Chung Valley and Mui Wo.

The 11-year-old Duan Zong died of a fever at this time. Lantau legend has it that the boy was buried in Mui Wo, and the eight-year-old younger prince Zhao Bing was enthroned as emperor. But there is no evidence of this to support this folklore. Stephen Tse, a Tung Chung resident who runs cultural tours around Lantau, says the tale did not appear until the 1800s, promoted by some ex-Qing officials.

What is well remembered is the loyalty of the officials to the doomed throne - regent Yang in particular. As one-historian notes: Yang's honourable behaviour and his plight as a refugee "deeply touched the hearts" of the local people.

So much so that Yang is now revered as a god on Lantau and in the rest of Hong Kong. The Hau Wong temples at Tai O and Tung Chung are among Lantau's oldest and most revered buildings, and Hau Wong became the most important god for Tung Chung people.



Hau Wong Temple in Tung Chung. Photo by Nick Seymour



### THE SILVERMINE BAY MASSACRE

In the waning days of World War 2, one of Hong Kong's most notorious wartime incidents took place at Mui Wo. Nearly 20 local people were killed in the Silvermine Bay Massacre, and three Japanese were hanged as a result.

Lantau at the time, like the eastern New Territories, had small bands of guerrillas who harassed the Japanese during the 1942-45 occupation. Most were local men, occasionally supplemented by Red Army fighters.

The guerrillas attacked a Japanese outpost in Tung Chung in May 1945, killing six Japanese. In August, they attacked the main Japanese base in Mui Wo, but with little success.

In response, the Japanese rounded up all the residents of Mui Wo on August 19 and assembled them at Silvermine Bay beach. Women, children and the elderly were released after a day but, according to historian James Hayes: "About 20 younger men were tied to stakes, beaten, given water torture and kept without food or water for almost a week." Nine of them died.

The Japanese also executed three local leaders. Two other Mui Wo villagers were executed and a woman gathering wood fuel on the hillside was shot for no reason. Mysteriously, three local men ordered to row wounded Japanese soldiers to Kowloon were never seen again.

The trial in March-April 1946 was the largest of the Hong Kong War Crimes trials, with 15 Japanese charged and 34 prosecution witnesses.

The two officers in charge and a sargeant-major were sentenced to death by hanging, and another nine received prison sentences.

### HOW LANTAU GOT ITS NAME

The source of Lantau's name is as clear as Lantau Peak on a foggy winter's day.

The current Chinese name, Tai Yu San (大嶼山), is a relatively new one.

The earliest official mention of the island, back in the Song dynasty, referred to a cluster of 36 islands called Tai Hei San (大奚山). The character hei also meant slave, a reference perhaps to the use of corvée labour here.

Eventually, Tai Hei San name began to mean just Lantau Island. We have evidence of that on the 1765 Hau Wong temple bell in Tung Chung.

At some point after that, Lantau also became known as Tai Yu San (大魚山), 魚 meaning fish – obviously a reference to the many fishermen on the island. This somehow transmogrified to the current usage, Tai Yu San, where 嶼 means islet.

The source of the English name is just as unclear. Portuguese records in the 16th century use the spelling "Lantao", as do later Dutch and British accounts. This is often assumed to derive from Nam Tau, meaning "broken head", because of the cleft in Lantau Peak. But that is hardly visible to those on Lantau, and really only apparent at a distance.

More likely is that Europeans became confused with Nantou, or Namtau in Cantonese, now a part of Shenzhen, but then a major port on the lower Pearl River.



### THIS IS THE EARLIEST KNOWN MAP THAT REFERS TO LANTAU

Lantau is the island on the top right with eight place names. The names can be seen as follows:

Nor Pui O (螺盃澳, referring to Pui O), Tong Fuk (塘福), Shek Pik (石壁), Tai Ho Shan (大蠔山, referring to Tai Ho), Tung Sai Chung (東西涌), Sha Lo Wan (沙螺灣), Tai O (大澳), Mui Wo Tsuen (梅窠村), Kai Kung Tau (雞公頭, referring to Peak Hill), Chek Lap Chau (赤鱗洲).